Chapter 2
Cultivating Consumer Restraint in an Ecologically Full World: The Case of "Take Back Your Time"

Michael F. Maniates

Ours is an ecologically full world of some 6.5 billion people, more than half of whom live in material poverty. It is a world where the capacity of environmental systems to absorb abuse while delivering vital goods and services is more than fully taxed. Current patterns of global consumption deplete natural resources (like fisheries or ground water) faster than they regenerate. Prevailing networks of production create waste in volumes that overwhelm the absorptive capacity of natural systems (leading to problems like climate change). Taken together, 1.4 planets of ecosystem capacity and natural resource stocks are required to sustain human society, and we are quickly heading to 1.5 and beyond.[1] Growing affluence among the world's poor is yielding a class of "new consumers" for whom automobiles, a diet rich in meat, and larger homes with more possessions are the looming norm,[2] and transnational corporations faced with saturated markets in the rich world work diligently to cultivate new consumer appetites among the new consumers of the poor world. Humanity seems locked on a collision course with massive ecological decline, destabilizing crisis, and authoritarian (even draconian) social and political response.[3]

Not, in short, a very pretty picture.

It is not, however, an inevitable picture. Activists and scholars around the world, working alone or in loosely coordinated networks, are building the foundation for environmentally sustainable systems of production and consumption. Their work cuts through treacherous, politicized terrain. Slowing the assault on climate, decarbonizing the energy economy, transforming agriculture and reviving critical

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[1] See, for example, the Global Footprint Network <http://www.footprintnetwork.org>

[2] For example Norman Myers and Jennifer Kent, *The New Consumers: The Influence of Affluence on the Environment*, Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2004.

[3] For a recent treatment of these possibilities, and at least one possible response, see Robert Hopkins, *The Transition Handbook: From Oil Dependency to Local Resilience*, White River Jct., Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishers, 2008.

L. Lebel et al. (eds.), *Sustainable Production Consumption Systems: Knowledge, Engagement and Practice,* DOI 10.1007/978-90-481-3090-0_2,

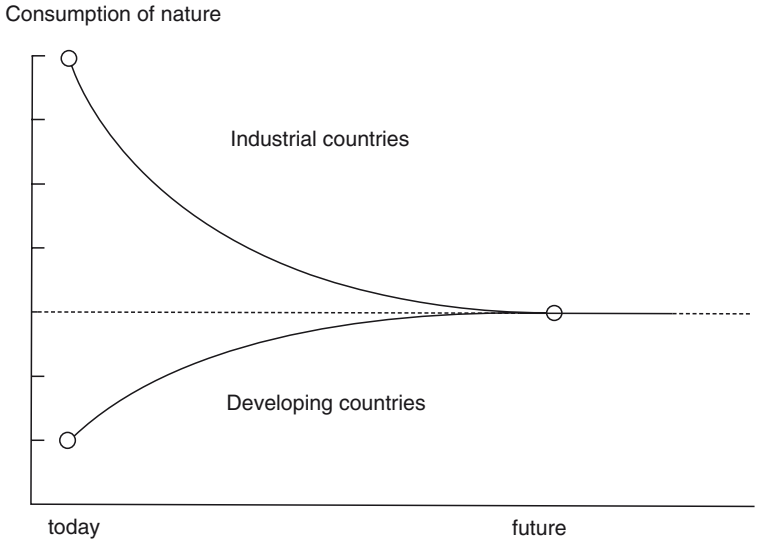
global fisheries (to name but a few looming challenges) demands more than massive investments in renewable energy infrastructure, or consumer commitment to easy, cost-effective environmental measures like replacing inefficient light bulbs or more aggressive recycling. Nothing less than a new global compact is necessary, one where the overconsumers of the world deliver significant reductions in resource throughput and material accumulation, this in order to create "ecological space" for increasing consumption by the world's poor – and where, in turn, the global underconsumers explore development paths of low-consumption, high-prosperity living.[4] This is contraction and convergence on a grand scale: Contraction of the consumption by the rich as the foundation for the convergence of consumption levels by all at some sustainable level.

At first blush, *any* talk of contraction and convergence seems hopelessly naïve. ("You'll never get the rich to cut back," is one reflexive response; "the poor will never show restraint" is another; "contraction and convergence requires massive value change or some deep, mobilizing crisis" and "Americans will never sacrifice without a crisis" are other common reactions.) It's no wonder that most people who work on issues of sustainable consumption and production shy away from the question of "how much is enough." Where, after all, are the potent research questions – those that generate grants, drive publications, or influence policy – if the desire for ever-escalating consumption is hard-wired in the human psyche or part of deeply held value sets? Who aspires to research and activism that is intrinsically coercive, or that would promote policies of reduced consumption that fly in the face of human desire? Better, many conclude, to focus on "realistic" and tangible responses to ecological overshoot, such as the development of new production technologies capable of accommodating escalating consumption and lower environmental cost, or economic instruments that might shift consumption toward more environmentally benign products, or education and public-information projects that might, over time, reshape values. And, indeed, this is the bulk of the work now occurring under the flag of "sustainable consumption."

What appears to be idealistic or naïve is, alas, coldly realistic. For without significant contraction in material consumption among the rich and inspired restraint by the poor, other important measures to lighten human's footprint on the planet – from individual efforts to live more environmentally to ambitious infrastructure programs to reshape energy systems – will be swamped by the juggernaut of ever-escalating global consumption. Coercion and sacrifice could then become the norm as the ability of ecosystems to provide critical goods and services

[4] A rich literature exists on "contraction and convergence," and on the limits of technological change and consumption shifting alone to fully blunt the dynamics of ecologic overshoot. See, for example, Guha, *How Much Should a Person Consume?* Berkeley: The University of California Press, 2006; Myers and Kent, *op.cit.*; Princen, Maniates, and Conca, *Confronting Consumption*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002; and Wolfgang Sachs and Tilman Santarius et al., *Fair Future and Limited Resources*, London: Zed Books, 2007. The nearby figure on "contraction and convergence" is taken from Sachs et al.

decline.[5] New technologies, consumption shifting and education: they all blunt the edge of growing global consumption and buy time to address the deeper question of how to challenge a spreading global culture of consumerism. But they are not sufficiently potent to align consumption with global ecosystem capacity to process waste, regenerate renewable resource systems, and support human economic activity. In the face of exponentially growing consumption in a world beset by numerous environmental threats to human well being, nothing less radical and realistic than informed, careful struggle toward a global norm of consumer restraint will prove sufficient.



The barriers to such norm-building are numerous and powerful – which is another way of saying that the field is rich with provocative research questions. The path must be paved by vigorous discussion and debate: sustained, global, dynamic, and animated by innovative local, national, and transnational initiatives that explore avenues for greater prosperity through lower levels of consumption.[6] Perhaps the greatest barrier to these explorations is the hegemonic view that *any* decline in

[5] In stark contrast to contemporary environmental discourses, which often view "crisis" as a necessary, even desirable precursor to policies of environmental sustainability and social justice, earlier environmental writers highlighted the undesirable consequences of crisis: authoritarianism, anti-democratic impulses, the search for quick fixes, even those that undermine essential liberties or civil rights. Today's scholars of environmental sustainability could benefit from a close reading of this earlier literature. See, for example, Robert Heilbroner, *An Inquiry Into The Human Prospect: Updated and Reconsidered for the Nineteen Nineties*, New York: R.S. Means, 1991 (originally published in 1980), William Ophuls, "The Scarcity Society," *Harper's Magazine*, April 1974, pp. 47–52, and Ophuls, *Ecology and the Politics of Scarcity*, New York: W.H. Freeman, 1977.

[6] Guha, *op. cit.*, offers a template for how to think about such a process in his discussion of escalating consumption in India.

individual or household consumption *always* leads to a loss of happiness, or to sacrifice. That this article of faith is so easily received, even as a growing body of transnational research demonstrates the contrary, frustrates those who'd hope for research-driven changes in public policy and popular perception. From the simple standpoint of individual human happiness and socially collective well-being, more isn't always better. Less is sometimes best. Yet, if "material restraint" or "reduction in consumption" remains synonymous with "sacrifice and pain," no policymaker or politician will rise to the challenge of forging new avenues for debate and change. Policymaking on the consumption question will come only in the face of intractable crisis, long after windows of creative, effective, and anticipatory consumption policy have closed.

To what extent can determined activism bolstered by strategic research undermine the view that happiness is linked to ever escalating consumption? How might public policy and new institutions that offer individuals and communities opportunities to consume less in ways that enhance immediate happiness and overall life satisfaction best be identified, and then injected squarely in the midst of public conversation? Where do the pressure points for a shift to sustainable consumption lie in a politics of the global north that celebrates consumption? And how, for the purposes of this volume, might additional research facilitate meaningful political change in support of an agenda of contraction and convergence? This chapter touches on these questions by exploring "Take Back Your Time" (TBYT), a public-policy initiative now underway in the United States that aspires to build a participatory politics of consumption reduction. Built around the notion of "time famine," TBYT argues that politically constrained choices around work and leisure in the United States make it especially difficult for United States (US) consumers to exercise restraint in their consumption choices. If offered alternate choices, especially choices regarding the structure of work, Americans would consume less *in the rational pursuit of their own happiness*. Even modest success of TBYT's agenda would be an important step in a politics of contraction and convergence that rejects a discourse of sacrifice and deprivation.

Three sections follow. The first orients the reader to the evolution and aims of TBYT. The second describes a recent, revealing shift in the program that highlights several research opportunities (or "knowledge gaps," in the language of this volume) for scholars and practitioners of sustainable consumption. The elements of an alternate research framework around sustainable consumption–production systems emerge in a final section. Each section draws on extended conversation with those within TBYT, others in the US environmental community working on issues of sustainable consumption, and the author's own participation in TBYT.

These sections together offer a story about potential – the potential for activists to challenge the view that more consumption yields greater happiness, and that of researchers to drive an innovative politics of sustainability through targeted work in support of activist agendas. It is a story of pregnant possibility rather than tangible accomplishment, one of shifting plot lines shaped by global financial instability, the rising cost of oil, and the pressure on production–consumption systems dependent upon cheap energy to evolve and adapt. It is, ultimately, a story meant to raise questions.

How, for example, might research expertise best be applied to the task of creating institutions and incentives that join increased happiness with reduced material consumption? What are the payoffs of close collaboration between scholars and practitioners? Perhaps most important, in what ways must "sustainable consumption" as a research enterprise be reimagined if new knowledge is to make a difference fast enough to count?

Making a "Movement" Real

From VSM to TBYT

Anti-consumerist notions of simplicity, frugality, and living with less are nothing new to the US cultural landscape. For the past 200 years, periodic bursts of public interest in frugality and simple living – as both a moral choice and political act – have been followed, more often than not, by even more intense periods of accelerated acquisitiveness.[7] In contemporary US culture, these counter-cultural impulses to live with less cohere in what many call "the voluntary simplicity movement" (VSM). The outlines of today's VSM emerged as part of the "appropriate technology movement" and "back to the land" impulses of the late 1960s and early 1970s (themselves a response to the politically turbulent 1960s), and were best captured by Duane Elgin's 1981 book *Voluntary Simplicity*.

Multifaceted and uncoordinated, VSM became, in the 1980s and 1990s, the banner for a wide range of loosely connected individual actions centered on consumption choices. Action ranged from enacting the advice from newsletters like the *Tightwad Gazette* (tips on how to live life on the cheap) to expressly political objections to structural poverty (even today one can see in the US the vintage 1980s bumper sticker "Live Simply So That Others May Simply Live"). The intensity of these actions varied, from limited consumption shifts among many to radical lifestyle changes by a few, but they typically shared a preoccupation with "taking control" of one's life and escaping, if for just a bit, the demeaning, numbing effects of everyday commercial life.

The rise of the VSM during this time was surely connected to the tightening squeeze on the US middle class. The decline of the US labor movement in the 1980s, the growing number of two-wage-earner households during this period (in response to a "middle-class squeeze" of flattening salaries and rising costs, and changing norms about women in the workplace), and an upward creep in the length of the average work week meant that Americans were spending more time at work even as the proportion of two-income families was growing.[8] As work drew time

[7] David Shi, *The Simple Life: Plain Living and High Thinking in American Culture*, Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 2001.

[8] Elizabeth Warren and Amelia Tyagi, *The Two-Income Trap: Why Middle-Class Mothers & Fathers Are Going Broke*, New York: Basic Books, 2003.

and energy away from home and leisure activities, families increasingly characterized their lives as harried and "out of control." At the same time, writers and speakers with something to say about the hidden costs of consumerism and ways of escaping "the rat race" enjoyed increasing visibility. Joe Dominguez and Vicki Robin, for example, became known for their self-help seminars in the late 1980s that led to their 1992 book *Your Money or Your Life: Transforming Your Relationship with Money and Achieving Financial Independence*. John de Graaf's 1997 film *Affluenza* (which documents the hidden costs of consumerism to individuals and families across the US) was, for a great stretch of time, one of the best selling, most watched films shown on the US Public Broadcasting System.[9] Former community-college administrator Cecile Andrews was catapulted to prominence as the author of *The Circle of Simplicity* (1998), a guide to forming neighbourhood study and action groups for removing the clutter of materialism from one's daily life. Robin, Andrews, and de Graaf, together with other writers, filmmakers, and academics, could frequently be seen together at "simplicity meetings" and workshops, sometimes drawing crowds in the hundreds when only a few dozen were expected.

These simplifiers weren't radical, and they weren't fringe. During this period some 15–25% of US households were intentionally "downshifting" by consciously living below their means, refusing to take higher paid work to avoid job stress and long work hours, or voluntarily reducing work hours at an existing job, even in the face of diminished opportunities for advancement and salary increases. A majority of these simplifiers were more highly educated than the average citizen; college degrees are common to this group, and advanced degrees or special skill sets are not rare. Most simplifiers, moreover, were at or near median household income levels before their tilt towards frugality – few, in other words, were "simplifying" by trading their Jaguar in for a BMW. And most, it bears repeating, were motivated by workplace overload or burnout.[10]

The voluntary simplicity movement wasn't really, then, a movement per se. It was instead a vivid example of a distinctly American inclination toward individualized, consumer-centered responses to social ills better addressed collectively, though political action and public debate. There were no formal leaders, no designated spokeswomen and men, no central agenda, and hence no capacity for the kind of focused social action that distinguishes effective social movements. It was politically incoherent, a movement in waiting, one laden with possibility.

A shift came in 2001, when the Fetzer Institute[11] invited 24 "leaders of the simplicity movement" to its conference center to explore how the VSM could be

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[9] According to Bullfrog Films, the film's distributor.

[10] For more data and sources, see Michael Maniates, "In Search of Consumptive Resistance: The Voluntary Simplicity Movement," in Thomas Princen, Michael Maniates, and Ken Conca, eds., *Confronting Consumption*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002.

[11] "The Fetzer Institute's mission, to foster awareness of the power of love and forgiveness in the emerging global community, rests on its conviction that efforts to address the world's critical issues must go beyond political, social, and economic strategies to their psychological and spiritual roots." From http://www.fetzer.org/

sharpened into a genuine political force. This inaugural meeting was followed by two strategy sessions in 2002 – one in March in Kalamazoo, Michigan, the other in August at Oberlin College in Ohio – that saw the Simplicity Forum grow to 68 members, including several academic researchers (including this author).[12] Though far ranging, the discussions usually returned to one question: how can the millions of people who consider themselves part of the VSM be mobilized on behalf of meaningful policy change? One slowly emerging answer was the "Take Back Your Time" project. John de Graaf, a documentary filmmaker (with the aforementioned "Affluenza" among the productions in his portfolio) living in Seattle, Washington, assumed primary responsibility for the project.

In the years since its launch, TBYT has established an identity and agenda separate from The Simplicity Forum (though a perusal of the websites of both programs shows a close working relationship). de Graaf, working with others, has generated a level of public attention and debate about work, consumption, and sustainability well out of proportion to the meager resources at his command. His is the only organization that consistently addresses the connections among work, leisure, consumption, social capital, and environmental sustainability. Groups ranging from conservative businessmen to college students warm to his message that overwork, lack of vacation, and few if any options for part-time work for part-time pay (while keeping one's health benefits) drive levels of consumption that are unhealthy for people and the environment. Visitors to TBYT's website (www.timeday.org) and its sister project (www.right2vacation.org) quickly grasp the message that working less and consuming less can be a realistic means to a happier life.

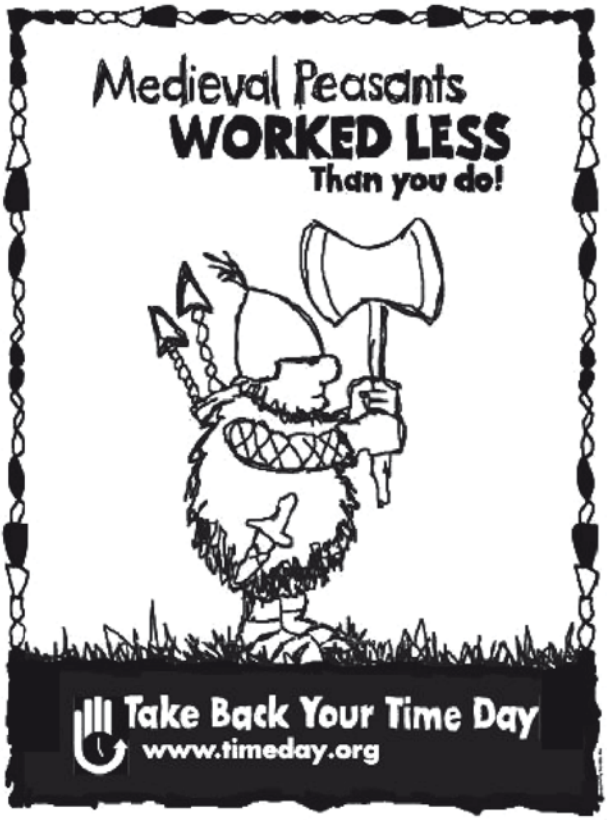
And yet, despite a striking level of publicity and conversation, TBYT has generated little actual policy action since its inception. de Graaf, and other environmental leaders interviewed for this chapter, believe that this could quickly shift. Americans are poised for a change, they believe, and ever-escalating levels of consumption are not the only path to individual and national prosperity. The right combination of factors could elevate TBYT's agenda to national prominence.

The TBYT Agenda

TBYT seeks to mobilize political resources in support of state and federal legislation that would allow, and perhaps compel, Americans to trade consumption for leisure. At its birth, TBYT was imagined as a vehicle for tapping middle-class frustration in support of national legislation for an optional 32 h/4 day work week. (Under this legislation, workers would have the right, with some exceptions, to work three-fourth or four-fifth time for three-fourth or four-fifth pay, while keeping the core of employer-provided benefits.) This policy agenda, for reasons described below, failed to generate a critical mass of public support and political action.

[12] Meeting summaries are available from the Simplicity Forum at http://www.simplicityforum.org/congressreports.html

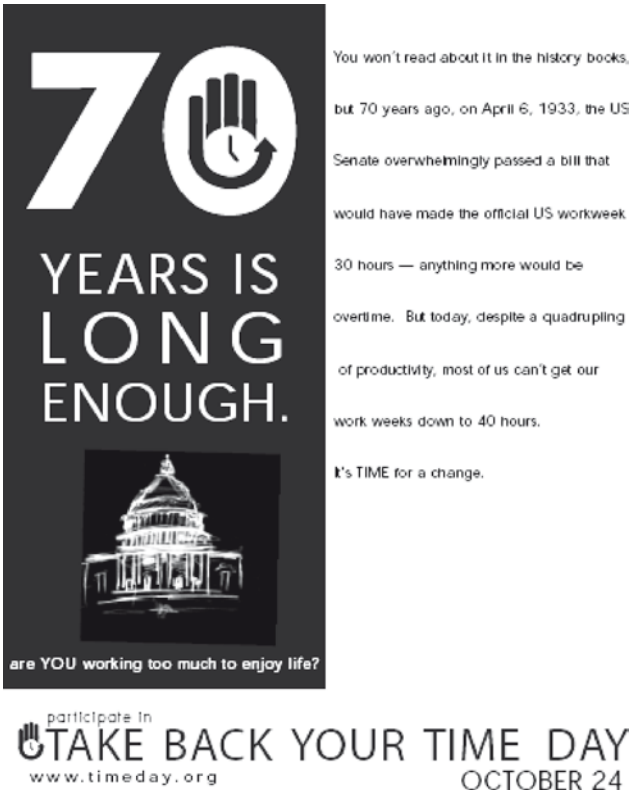
TBYT's policy agenda was subsequently expanded and reordered: Part- and flex-time work (still the core agenda item) was dropped to the bottom of an expanding list of initiatives, and other time-focused initiatives were brought forward. These included mandatory paid family leave, mandatory paid sick-leave for all employees, and mandatory paid vacation. It was hoped that progress on one or more of these initiatives would build momentum for revisiting the 32 h work week, on the assumption that many Americans, if offered the opportunity, would choose less work (and thus reduced consumption) for more leisure time.[13] Since the beginning of the latest recession, TBYT has also been seen again by reporters and activists as a resource for ideas about saving jobs by shortening the work week and spreading jobs around.



The root problem, in TBYT's view, is one of recent history and political economy. Despite warnings after WWII that productivity gains in the US would result in a

[13] TBYT's "Time to Care Public Policy Agenda" is available at www.timeday.org

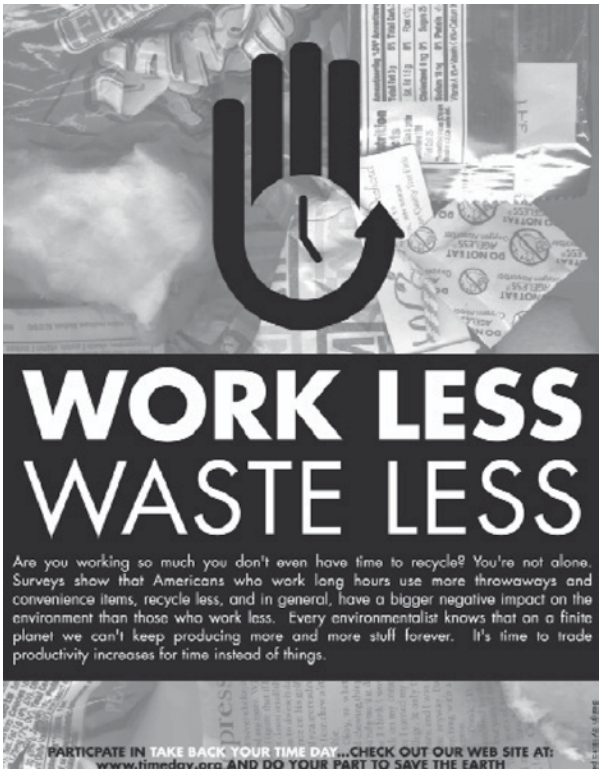
glut of leisure time (a distinct worry among sociologists of the time), specific political–economic processes drove the US in a different direction: increased productivity gains per worker were translated into the exponential growth of per capita material acquisition with no increase in leisure time, and with little measurable increase in human happiness. This process intensified in the 1980s and 1990s, when a work and spend treadmill[14] energized by easy credit and stagnant wages fueled a mutually reinforcing dynamic of more hours at work, growing compensatory consumption outside of the job, increased debt, and increased work. The interplay of overwork and rising consumption leads to increased levels of stress, undermines family and neighbourhood bonds, generates a rapid increase in "convenience consumption" (e.g. fast food), TV consumption and binge vacationing. The result is escalating environmental degradation[15] and withdrawal from civic life.



[14] Schor provides an accessible analysis of this treadmill. See Juliet Schor, *The Overspent American: Why We Want What We Don't Need*, New York: Harper, 1999.

[15] See, for example, "Are Shorter Work Hours Good for the Environment?," at http://www.cepr.net/documents/publications/energy_2006_12.pdf

From TBYT's perspective, many Americans grasp this dynamic and yearn for a remedy. They work, as individual consumers and workers, toward piecemeal solutions. Yet their stubbornly individualistic efforts to change this situation yield little of lasting consequence absent broader institutional change. For example, a few employees at a firm might negotiate flexible or part-time work hours (drawing on an array of resources on effective strategies for "getting your way"[16]), but their success can make it difficult for other employees to later cut similar deals of their own – and indeed, such arrangements could exacerbate the overwork of others. Even when employers are accommodating, the available choices are limited. Because US employment is comparatively "blocky" – one is either unemployed or works 46 h/week – and because the best health benefits come with full-time employment, it is difficult for people eager to trade reductions in consumption for less time at work to pursue this option.



[16] For example Lynn Berger, *The Savvy Part-Time Professional: How to Land, Create, or Negotiate the Part-time Job of Your Dreams*, Sterling, VA: Capital Books, 2006, or Page Hobey, "When No Could Mean Yes: How to Negotiate a Flexible Work Schedule," at http://www.mommytrackd.com/no-means-yes

TBYT isn't so naïve as to believe that all Americans share its perspective on the costs and perils of overwork. It maintains, though, that mainstream politics in the United States has for too long attributed overwork – long hours, little vacation, restricted family and sick leave – to something virtuous and important: a valued cultural holdover from the days of the frontier, perhaps, or evidence of a uniquely "can do" American approach to life. In reality, the drivers, costs, and possibilities are more nuanced. Many Americans feel trapped by too much work and too few choices in the workplace. Many engage in "downshifting" and speak to a desire to have more time outside of work, even if it means making less.[17] Given the choice, many such individuals would choose to work less, earn less, and have more leisure time for broadly non-material activities. These early innovators would serve as a model for others – as living examples of any number of lower consumption/higher prosperity ways of living – and help drive deeper, more animated debate about non-material sources of satisfaction and prosperity.

How, though, might this slice of America best be mobilized by a new activist group with limited resources? For TBYT, the answer came straight out of the mainstream literature in environmental policymaking: create a focusing event, a big splash, a moment that crystallizes public concern and focuses the attention of political elites.[18] Inspired by the cultural impact and political success of the first "Earth Day" in 1970, de Graaf and others in the Simplicity Forum hit upon the notion of "Take Back Your Time Day." Observed on October 24 since 2003, "TBYT Day" commemorates what would be the final day of work for the year if Americans enjoyed, on average, the same vacation, sick leave, and holiday benefits of their European counterparts.

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[17] For example Schor, *op cit*., and Maniates, *op cit*.

[18] The notion that critical "focusing events" – a deadly smog, rivers aflame, massive oil spills, energy price spikes – drive progressive environmental policy runs through much of the sustainable consumption literature. One consequence is the perception that policy progress requires crisis, which can be a debilitating assumption when the crises at hand are potentially catastrophic and irreversible. Another consequence of the focusing event logic is the assumption that viable political pressure can be mobilized by *creating* a focusing event (Greenpeace with its photogenic Zodiac speedboats doing battle with lumbering whaling trawlers is the classic example). Lost in the ensuing discussion about whether to manufacture focusing events or wait for the catastrophes on the horizon is a critical assessment of the "focusing event" logic itself. Do dramatic events indeed lie at the root of striking changes in environmental (and other) policy? Or are other, more pivotal forces, in play? For a defining articulation of focusing-event politics regarding environmental policy, see Anthony Downs, "Up and Down with Ecology: The Issue Attention Cycle," *The Public Interest*, Volume 28 (Summer 1972), pp. 38–50. For a recent questioning of this focusing-event logic, and the price environmental scholars pay for so readily accepting it, see Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus, *Break Through: From the Death of Environmentalism to the Politics of Possibility*, New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2007.

Buzz but No Bounce

From a publicity/public awareness standpoint, Take Back Your Time Day has met de Graaf's expectations. Dozens of colleges and universities have adopted the Time Day project as a teaching tool, more than 150 communities have initiated Time Day observances, and near a 1,000 articles about time famine have appeared in major newspapers and other media outlets, especially around October 24th – all this in a national political environment generally hostile to debate about the work and worker's rights. The Time Day website – well crafted, frequently updated, visually compelling – receives thousands of hits a month. *Take Back Your Time: Fighting Overwork and Time Poverty in America*, a 2003 resource book edited by de Graaf and touted as "The Official Guide to Taking Back Your Time," continues to sell many years after its publication. The same is true for *Affluenza*, a trade book that captures many of the themes of de Graaf's two films for the Public Broadcasting System: "Affluenza" and "Escape from Affluenza." For an activist group of its size

(essentially de Graaf – employed part-time as Executive Director – and a few volunteers), the sustained "buzz" generated by Take Back Your Time Day would be the envy of much larger, better financed activist groups.

One source of this growing attention was TBYT's expanding public policy agenda, which slowly grew to include promotion of more sick leave, better vacation policy, release from mandatory overtime, and even Election Day as a federal holiday. Simultaneously, the range of suggested activities for TBYT Day exploded, making necessary an extensive web page at timeday.org to list all the possibilities.[19] With multiple activities and messages, TBYT spoke to more constituencies. "We've clearly struck a nerve with Take Back Your Time Day," says Gretchen Burger, then a national staff person for TBYT, in a 2006 phone conversation. "I'm amazed by the number of emails and phone calls that I receive, from people all over the country, wanting to learn more or become part of this initiative."

And yet, in seeking to be many things to many people, TBYT sacrificed much of its ability to mobilize people around a single, clear and distinctive problem and set of actions. The diffusion of message and loss of focus wasn't planned. Rather, it arose incrementally as the organization sought new opportunities to broaden its base and cultivate funding. Financial support, in fact, has been a long-standing problem, one that de Graaf believes prevents TBYT from establishing itself as a national policy force. At fault, he suggests, are the ideological norms of major foundations and the framing of their philanthropic initiatives. Conservative foundations, says de Graaf, appreciate the TBYT focus on family time and the cultivation of civic virtue in place of rampant consumerism, but they balk at the implied regulation of workplace hours. Left-leaning foundations understand the connection among time famine, environmental degradation, and overconsumption, but don't know how to fit funding for the project into a template that separates these connections into discrete program silos. Interestingly, other activists and funders interviewed for this study (some working for sustainable-consumption NGOs, others more tightly linked to the foundation community), disagree. They believe that ample funding could be available to TBYT if it focused its message, developed a political strategy for mobilizing support around a legislative agenda (a strategy that moves beyond "celebrating" TBYT Day), and focused its attention on a handful of core constituencies.

Upon reflection, de Graaf is inclined to agree. "Perhaps we've tried to be all things to all people," he said in early 2007, "and, as a result, we haven't found one or two items around which a critical mass of people will rally." But generating a potent strategy and working closely with dedicated constituencies takes staff, and TBYT is a distinctly two- , sometimes three-person operation at best. It hasn't had the capacity to capitalize, in politically tangible ways, on the enthusiasm generated by scores of TBYT events that regularly occur around the United States. And yet, other political movements have gotten off the ground with less coordinated support and publicity. The "Student Anti-Sweatshop Movement" in the United States, which swept university campuses in 2002 with an agenda of ridding bookstores and

[19] See http://www.timeday.org/tbyt_day.asp

university clothing shops of products made under sub-standard working conditions or sweatshop wage rates, is but one example. That activist endeavor had a tight, simple message (no sweatshop products will be sold in college bookstores) and sought to mobilize a relatively few number on people (students at just a few campuses) around very specific activities.

Examples like these weren't lost on de Graaf and those around him.

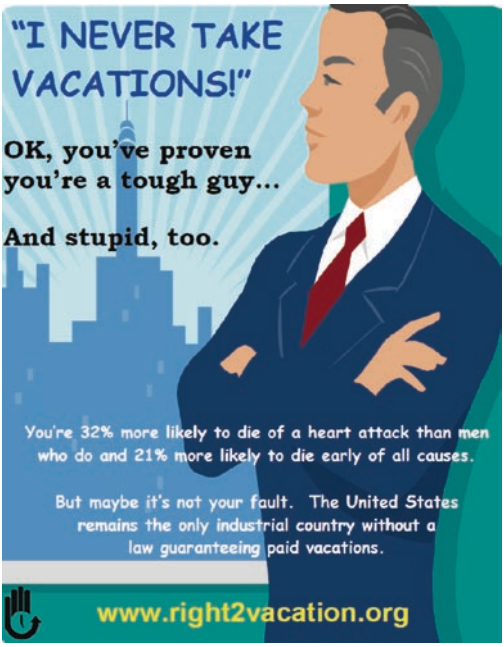
Their answer: Take a Vacation.

From "Politely Taking" to "Demanding Rights:" Moving from Mass Appeal to Targeted Action

Despite its considerable success in focusing public attention on time famine and overconsumption, TBYT suffered from two problems, one of practical politics, the other of political psychology. Practically speaking, the media-savvy choice to center the initiative on an annual "Take Back Your Time" Day left participants unsure about how they might best foster meaningful change. TBYT's range of suggested actions were largely polite and symbolic, and usually too broad and often too trivial to create a sense of solidarity around the felt possibility of meaningful change. The political psychology of the initiative was equally ambiguous. Should participants be forceful, even angry, about the erosion of leisure time and the loss of worker control, and seek ways to ameliorate the situation? Was TBYT essentially a movement of resistance and protest? Had something been taken from us (our time), which we now had the right to reclaim? Or was the program more of a lighthearted affair meant to foster conversational openings about the benefits of better work–life balance?

TBYT's experience underscores the difficulty of mounting any effective political action in the absence of a clear sense of rights – rights enjoyed, revoked, violated, or withheld.[20] Yes, TBYT flirted with the sense of rights in its discussion of US labor history, pointing out that a 30 h work week was once on the cusp of passing as the law of the land. But de Graaf and others were never comfortable asserting that right to a reduced work week. Even the right to the option of working 32 h a week was deemed too risky at a time of insecure affluence among the middle class. TBYT was left, then, to float a policy agenda of guaranteed leave for birth or adoption, guaranteed sick leave, and guaranteed vacation, a day off for national elections, and making it easier to choose quality part-time work. The supporting language was timid ("Let's bring the United States up to the standards already in place in all other industrialized countries") and inevitably scattershot.

[20] James Jasper, *The Art of Moral Protest: Culture, Biography, and Creativity in Social Movements*, Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1997.



By the spring of 2008, the limitations of a rights-averse strategy were fully apparent. Joining forces with Joe Robinson (author and director of a small NGO called "Work to Live"), de Graaf launched "Right2Vacation.org," a sister initiative of TBYT. The new website launched with a national poll showing broad public support for mandatory, annual, paid vacations in the United States, a marked departure from current conditions.[21] The shift in political tone was palpable. Rather than politely suggest that workers reassert some claim over their time in any number of small ways, TBYT is urging Americans to assert their *right* to vacation time, a right others readily enjoy but which has been denied to US citizens. The tagline "The United States remains the only industrial country without a law guaranteeing paid vacations" permeates their public outreach materials. It's supported by a four-pronged argument: Loss of vacations (1) raises health-care costs, (2) reduces productivity, (3) undermine desirable social outcomes (time with family, connection to neighbours, civic engagement) and (4) costs the travel and vacation industry, with considerable loss of public engagement with nature. Each argument speaks to different constituencies but the focus rests on a single action: recover the right recognized in *all* other industrialized countries for people to enjoy time for relaxation and renewal.

[21] Paid (or, indeed, even unpaid) vacations are not mandated in the United States, and only 14% of working American take 2 weeks or more of vacation a year.

Vacation?

The notion of "vacation" as the springboard for a more aggressive politics of leisure and reduced material consumption may seem odd. After all, aren't vacations resource-intensive affairs marked by long airplane flights and too many trips to the buffet? Aren't they part of the problem, not the solution?

Not necessarily. First, the binge vacationing common to the United States – 3 or 4 day trips to exotic locales, marked by intense consumption – is as much a reaction to the paucity of vacation time and mounting job stress as anything else. Vacationing needn't be hurried and hedonistic. If workers knew they had an extended paid period of time away from work, they'd be less inclined to concentrate their recreation into short bursts of activity that can leave one feeling less refreshed at the end of it all.

Second, paid vacation doesn't mean more income; one's ability to consume wouldn't expand from paid leave (unless one took a second job during this vacation period). Indeed, if the productivity gains of paid vacations failed to offset the costs of these supported leaves, American workers might find themselves paying for their vacation

leave through more modest increases in salary. The income effect of a mandatory vacation plan is not openly discussed in TBYT and Right2vacation materials. The operating assumption, however, is that employers would be willing to absorb the costs associated with this plan, as long as any such costs are fully defrayed by the productivity gains (rested workers produce more per hour) and reduction in health-care costs (less job stress means lower health care needs) that come with increased vacation.

TBYT's muscular discussion about rights will surely alienate some of its past supporters. It opens the door, though, to collaboration with US businesses that currently provide paid vacation and life–work balance programs (often to enhance productivity, reduce health-care costs, and stem worker turnover). Should these programs became mandatory, those businesses that already provide them would face no transition costs, and might therefore enjoy a competitive advantage (at least in the short-term) over their less enlightened competitors. Wouldn't these businesses thus find it in their interest to support "the right to vacation?" That's de Graaf's hope.

Forceful conversation about the injustice of limited vacation could also be a catalyst for action on college and university campuses. de Graaf has visited scores of campuses over the past several years; he's an engaging speaker who generates considerable enthusiasm. Yet he has little to show for it in terms of sustained student activism. A narrower, more compelling focus on vacation could be the game-changer, especially in light of reports that today's students value work flexibility and free time far more than their predecessors.[22] Engaging students in a concrete struggle for workplace reform could drive change across the range of TBYT's public-policy agenda.

Finally, tough talk about vacation invites novel coalitions with the travel industry and major environmental groups. The decline in visitation to US forests and national parks, as fewer Americans engage in camping and hiking, offers one example.[23] The drivers of this decline are unclear, though de Graaf and others believe that one culprit is the increased fragmentation of vacation time: a day here and a day there, rather than two or three solid weeks away from work, makes it hard to load the family into the car and head for the wilds. Environmental groups working on public lands and wilderness issues are concerned, since reduced visitation could translate into declining public support for protecting natural lands. It's no accident, then, that Sierra Club Productions, in mid-2008, chose to support the making of a documentary (by de Graaf) on the importance of vacations to the national life. (Contrast this support against the general reluctance of environmental groups to fund or co-sponsor the earlier programs of TBYT.) To the extent that more vacation time could mean more travel – and perhaps more hiking, camping, and lower-cost eco-travel (for, recall, that additional vacation time doesn't come

[22] See, for example, P. Trunk, "What Gen Y Really Wants," *Time Magazine*, July 5, 2007, at http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1640395,00.html

[23] See, for example, MSNBC's report on "Visitors to National Forests on the Decline," November 29, 2008. <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/27970449/>

with additional income) – a potent coalition among travel specialists, environmental groups, outdoor equipment businesses, and nature educators is waiting to be born. The birthing event could prove to be the "'Vacation Matters' National Summit," held in August 2009 in Seattle.[24]

Each of these possibilities – corporate collaboration, environment–travel coalitions, and student engagement – present a set of "knowledge gaps" with which TBYT/Right2Vacation is now struggling.

One Research Need: Corporate Ecology

State regulation over economic life benefits some while hurting others. Rules that limit a particular kind of pollutant, for example, will penalize those industries (and its stockholders) whose production facilities generate the bulk of the offending compound. But this same set of rules will be a boon for businesses that manufacture pollution-control equipment or monitoring devices. Getting new policy in place depends upon understanding the complex "ecology" of winners and losers in the business world, on identifying the winners, and on marshaling their support at critical points in the policy process.

TBYT is no stranger to these realities of regulatory politics. Indeed, over the years it has been in conversation with several corporate entities (e.g. Perrier, Sam Adams beer, Blockbuster Video, and Beringer Wines) that would stand to gain from workplace regulation that created more leisure time. For a time, Panera Restaurants (a self-serve coffee-house and sandwich chain) was a corporate sponsor of TBYT, and Beringer Wines highlighted TBYT on its corporate website. Both stood to benefit from a "slower" lifestyle, one where workers had more time for conversation and relaxation. Beringer's motivation, as reported on the advertising analysis website "AdRant," was straightforward:

> Wine maker Beringer recently conducted a study that found more than half of respondents don't leave work on time but 28% would if they had social engagements with friends and family planned. With that nugget of information, Beringer has launched "Living 5 to 9," a nice play on the 9 to 5 grind and a new website which aims to help people manage their time better. Oh, and let's not forget the marketing angle here. The more Beringer helps people manage their time, the more likely they will leave work on time thereby allowing them time to stop at the store on the way home and buy more Beringer products. Everybody wins with this one.

Getting people to leave work early so that they can drink wine with friends may seem to trivialize TBYT's policy agenda. Still, Beringer's campaign and its connection to TBYT (which they initiated, not TBYT) is suggestive of the corporate alliances that could emerge around the current thrust toward "vacation rights."

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[24] See "Let's Create A 'Vacation Matters' National Conference for 2009" at <http://timeday.org/right2vacation/vacation.asp>

Discerning the outlines of an effective corporate coalition calls for three dimensions of knowledge generation and/or procurement:

- *Identification* In the US political economy, which corporate actors (domestic and transnational) up and down critical commodity and knowledge chains stand to gain the most from a political movement that champions reduced overall consumption in service of increased leisure time? What important analytic and strategic categories emerge (e.g. market share, regional influence, political power, culture of innovativeness) when assessing these potential corporate players? And which nascent industries and economic enterprises that might not yet figure on a list of existing corporations might be catapulted into economic prominence by virtue of a successful "Right to Vacation" agenda?

- *Coalition Articulation* What does theory, but more likely case-study analysis, say about how to best build coalitions of corporate actors in service of a public-policy agenda in support, first, of more paid vacation and, later, greater flexibility in workplace choices? Are business entities at some points in commodity chains more likely to productively participate in coalitions than others? Since many of the corporations involved will be transnational, what existing coalitions might serve or be modified to advance the TBYT agenda? Is there something special about a low-consumption/high-leisure agenda that argues for uncommon approaches to corporate organizing?
- *Inoculation* Finally, how have existing non-governmental organizations with significant corporate sponsorship maintained intellectual and programmatic

autonomy? How, in other words, can an initiative like TBYT that would organize key elements of the corporate sector avoid the appearance or reality of being co-opted?

de Graaf acknowledges the critical importance of such research and would embrace it. He and others working with him know of no systematic research that identifies those elements of the business sector that would be sympathetic to lower consumption/higher prosperity trajectories, much less research that suggests effective ways of organizing a coalition. Knowledge generation in this area could yield significant political payoff.

Another Research Challenge: Catalyzing Student Networks

In an undergraduate research project[25] recently completed for TBYT, Jaclyn Stallard of Allegheny College draws on social-movement theory and a detailed case study of the "Student Anti-Sweatshop Movement"[26] to suggest ways in which TBYT might mobilize enduring student support across the country for its time–famine initiatives. Stallard's work identifies strong resonance of many of TBYT's policy concerns with the interests (and fears) of undergraduate college/university students. Chief among these is the conviction among students that the flexible work schedule they enjoy in school is something they'd struggle to create in the work world. The freedom to trade work (and thus income, and consumptive capacity) for leisure time emerged a consistently attractive option. Stallard's research reveals, however, that TBYT's earlier public-policy agenda was too diffuse to mobilize students. Necessary, in Stallard's view, is a single focus with a strong moral component that connected to students' daily lives. Stallard points to many examples where student activism around an issue spread like wildfire across campuses, and argues that something like the "right to vacation" could have similar effect.

Stallard's work points to three especially important areas for future research:

- *Issue Resonance and Framing* Among university students in both the global north and south, what are the key attitudes and concerns with respect to consumption, overconsumption, job satisfaction, lifestyle, and leisure time? With this knowledge in place, how can initiatives like Right2Vacation and TBYT be narrowed, highlighted, or recast to connect with student sensibilities?

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[25] *Unlocking the Origins of Political Opportunity: Student Roles and Power Potential in Social and Environmental Movements*, Senior Research Project, Dept. of Environmental Science, Allegheny College. An abstract is available at http://webpub.allegheny.edu/dept/envisci/ESInfo/comps/2006abstracts.html#stallard Copies of the larger report are available upon request from Michael Maniates.

[26] See Peter Dreier and Richard Appelbaum, "The Campus Anti-Sweatshop Movement," *The American Prospect*, November 30, 2002, and the homepage of the US Student Anti-Sweatshop Movement at http://www.studentsagainstsweatshops.org/

- *Network Building* Student activist networks, either US centered or transnational, have been remarkably effective in elevating the political salience of public-policy issues and marshalling political pressure at key moments. Stallard's work identified the Student Anti-Sweatshop initiative as a model, both for its rapid growth and success, and for its transnational character as well. The "anti Coca-Cola" network is an example of another transnational network that took the university student community by storm – but unlike the Anti-Sweatshop movement, this network originated in the global south.[27] What are the key elements of especially successful networks of student activism? How congruent are these elements with the capacity of TBYT and similar organizations to foster student activism? What are the organizational and financial costs to launch a network, with a reasonable hope for policy success?
- *Connecting to Strategic Planning* Higher education in the United States faces a daunting demographic reality over the next two decades. Nationally, the number of students seeking admission to colleges and universities will peak in 2009–2010, level off for a handful of years, then decline – slowly at first, and then with increasing pace. Most colleges and universities, especially those with limited endowments or constrained markets, are scrambling to develop strategic plans and marketing niches that will allow them to thrive amidst these new demographic realities. Many are looking to frame their historical mission – education for the social good, training new workers, generating research products – around new opportunities and realities. The need to do so has only been intensified by the global economic crisis. Which institutions of higher learning would be most amenable to incorporating ideas about work, leisure, stress and policy change in its strategic planning? How might colleges and universities seeking special relevance to emerging economic conditions be identified and introduced to TBYT's agenda? How, in particular, might the nation's ~ 500 top liberal arts colleges, with their dominant focus on undergraduate education geared to citizenship, be especially engaged in this process?

Although some research in these general areas has been conducted, rarely has the resulting information been applied to the policy realm of consumption and leisure time. Opportunities exist, then, for linking researchers working on student attitudes[28] to those reflecting on how to frame a low-consumption agenda. Likewise, several practitioner communities exist with deep knowledge of linking student groups to transnational advocacy networks. But here too, their knowledge isn't easily or applied to the TBYT initiative. These practitioners aren't documenting their "lessons learned" in accessible ways, and no researchers have stepped forward with a systematic analysis that would fill the gap.

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[27] See, for example, the India Resource Center's Coca-Cola resources at www.indiaresource.org/campaigns/coke/index.html

[28] For example the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California Los Angeles at http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri/heri.html

Research Arena Three: Cementing an Environmental Politics of Time Famine

For at least two important reasons, major environmental NGOs in the US have been slow to incorporate "time politics" into their educational and policy agendas. Doing so would have diluted their core message of environmental protection during a time of unusual government hostility toward environmental protection. It may have also alienated supporters for whom the connection between time famine and overconsumption is difficult to see. However, as issues of environmental well-being become increasingly linked to the dynamics of consumption, US environmentalism must become more open to confronting the fundamental drivers of overconsumption. TBYT's connection of "vacation rights" to eco-travel and nature appreciation is a first, critical step toward cultivating such openness.

Moving beyond this first step won't happen easily or automatically. Recent voices within the US environmental community argue, for example, that "Apollo project" programs to develop new technologies of production and consumption must occupy the center of any move towards contraction and convergence. As tantalizing as these Promethean possibilities might be, they divert attention from the drivers of consumption, and of the ways in which structural change in work–leisure arrangements can slow the maddening treadmill of work and spend. If mainstream environmentalism is to stay focused on the connections between overwork and overconsumption, it will need considerable help from the research community, in at least the following three ways:

- *Building on "Vacation Rights"* The "Right2Vacation" initiative argues that more paid vacation time will lead to lower work stress, reduced binge vacationing, higher levels of local civic participation, deeper connection to (and appreciation of) local and regional environmental assets, and a growing political awareness of the benefits of trading income (and consumption) for leisure. These arguments are plausible on their face and enjoy some empirical support. Supporting research, however, is spread across several disciplines, dated, ill-matched to contemporary environmental concerns, or insufficiently robust to inform or motivate ambitious policy commitment by major environmental groups (and other political actors). There are significant opportunities, then, for the research community to synthesize and extend existing knowledge about the impact of extended paid vacation on consumption, travel, and the cultivation of civic and environmental sensibilities. This work could begin with a review of the varied literatures to develop a "state of knowledge" overview and assessment. Further work might explore the interplay between additional vacation time and environmentally optimal outcomes, or identify mechanisms for framing or institutionalizing vacation time in ways that foster high-leisure, low consumption activities.
- *Conceptual Brush-Clearing Regarding "Sacrifice"* Do some kinds of reductions in material consumption yield increased happiness, while others do not?

Probably so, but talking easily and naturally about these two categories proves difficult in a political and linguistic environment that reflexively equates all consumption reductions with dire sacrifice. Lacking are clear conceptual frameworks and an everyday language, supported by compelling everyday examples, that would allow policymakers and environmental groups to easily distinguish (for themselves and a sometimes skeptical public) reductions in material throughput that are happiness expanding from those that are not. Right2Vacation and TBYT are experiments in developing this sort of language – but these efforts remain less than intuitive, and their power over the popular vernacular of environmentalism remains unclear. What sorts of language and frames best convey the possibilities of reduced consumption in service of human happiness?

- *Animating the "Base"* TBYT and Right2Vacation are policy extensions of the voluntary simplicity movement. In some ways, both initiatives should have taken off long ago. After all, the available data suggest that at least a quarter of Americans are fundamentally sympathetic to notions of voluntary simplicity and time famine. The dilemma is that this base group of simplifiers sees political change as a function of individual acts of frugal consumption rather than the coordinated exercise of citizen power (another example of this can be found in Chapter 3, this volume). How can this group be "turned" toward a deeper engagement with citizen action, in support of TBYT's agenda? That's a surprisingly difficult question to answer. There has been scant systematic assessment in the last decade of public attitudes toward simplicity and entry points for fashioning action coalitions within this population. Little is known about the groupings and composition of key social and culture groups, in either (or both) the global north and south, that may be most receptive to a message of consumer restraint, and thus most readily enlisted in a political program of policy change. The largest marketing-research organizations probably have some of this information; one research task, then, for any drive – national or transitional – toward a global norm of consumer restraint is to discern how to leverage these data. Another task is to develop a rough data base of the many research endeavors[29] aimed at identifying those global constituencies most undermined or diminished by time famine and the decline of leisure time and civic consciousness. Perhaps by bringing together, in crude analytic ways, the conclusions and data of these myriad groups, important patterns will emerge that will facilitate a networking of key groups around the world *and* a joint identification of critical, and perhaps counterintuitive, constituencies.

[29] For example Harvard University's Project on Global Working Families at www.hsph.harvard.edu/globalworkingfamilies/

The Challenge to the Sustainable-Consumption Research Community

The story of TBYT and its partial metamorphosis into a "vacation rights" initiative offers three critical lessons for the research community. The first is that the natural-science culture of polite discourse and the ensuing retreat from the political[30] that characterize much of the scholarship on sustainable consumption may poorly serve activists who would advance a research-informed agenda for sustainable consumption. Like many of us working in this field, TBYT's first impulse was to be inclusive, accommodating, and open to multiple interpretations and actions. Appearing "reasonable," after all, is thought to confer credibility, and with credibility comes effectiveness. But the story didn't play out this way. Only when TBYT sharpened its message and spoke in sometimes uncompromising ways did genuinely viable opportunities for collaboration, coalition building, and public-policy pressure emerge. Scholars of sustainable consumption who would see their research products translated into effective policy outcomes may do well to reflect on the lessons of this case. While responsible science and collegial respect are always to be valued, there are costs to being reasonable, polite, and inclusive to a fault in the face of mounting environmental threats to human well being.

The second lesson is simply that there are a rich set of policy possibilities for fashioning political and economic arrangements that can enrich human satisfaction while reducing consumption. The TBYT experiment is just one of many. Rather than lament the lack of "political will" to confront the costs of unsustainable systems of production and consumption, researchers might begin investigating the ways in which political will might best be forged. For this, TBYT offers a third lesson: unlikely coalitions and hidden stakeholders in a politics of sustainable consumption lurk just beneath the surface. Identifying and mobilizing these actors may depend less on the comprehensiveness of statistics and indicators, and much more on the framing of issues. de Graaf is employing essentially the same set of objective facts in his "vacation rights" program as he was in his earlier TBYT efforts. Indeed, he uses the vacation initiative to speak more broadly to diverse audiences about the need for a cultural shift that would trade productivity for free time rather than consumption. The framing, however, is different, and out of this difference has emerged a coalition of disparate actors – students, travel agents, progressive corporations, environmental groups – that may yet prove successful in injecting time politics into national debate.

The math is inescapable. The planet cannot sustain nearly 7 billion people living the American (or even European) way. Happily, it doesn't have to for most of the world's inhabitants to enjoy a prosperous and satisfying life. Shifting from a global norm of "more is better" to one receptive to low-consumptive paths to happiness

[30] On the history and political costs of this emerging ethos of "politeness" in mainstream environmentalism, see Mark Dowie, *Losing Ground: American Environmentalism at the Close of the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996.

and security must rise to the top of any agenda for sustainability. The challenge, however, is to engage critical actors and significant slices of the public in a politics of structural change that would make, in the words of Paul Hawken "acting sustainably as easy as falling off a log."[31] Long relegated to the margins of environmentalism, and trapped by its own predisposition to individual consumer actions that consciously avoids broader collective action, the "simplicity movement" in the United States now struggles for political salience and public-policy power. If the movement finds its political footing in the US – arguably the epicenter of contemporary consumer culture – it becomes difficult to ignore the political feasibility of tying consumer restraint to increased prosperity. The door to a vibrant transnational politics of "how much is enough" then swings open a bit more. By delinking human happiness from material provisioning, recent research points to an affirming politics of "de-consumption" that could bolster human well-being without invoking the politically paralyzing specter of sacrifice. The next step is to build on such research with inquiry and insight around the networks, organizing dynamics, critical actors, and social groupings that together could propel the time–famine movement onto the US, and thus transnational, stage[32].

[31] From the preface of Paul Hawken, *The Ecology of Commerce*, New York: HarperCollins, 1994.

[32] Portions of this chapter are drawn, in revised form, from Michael Maniates, "Struggling with Sacrifice: Take Back Your Time and Right2Vacation.org," in Michael Maniates and John Meyers eds., *The Environmental Politics of Sacrifice*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010.